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The University of Southern Mississippi

Ghosts of the Mind:  
The Supernatural and Madness in Victorian Gothic Literature

by  
Stephanie Craig

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Honors College of  
The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
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## Abstract

The Victorian era was arguably the most productive time for the Gothic genre. Laden with supernatural experiences and insanity around every corner, the Gothic created a distinct genre of eeriness and morbidity. The key to understanding the genre's development lies in the culture that caused it to thrive. Victorian culture saw the emergence of supernatural experimentation, particularly in the Spiritualist movement, as well as the further development of psychology. These elements of Victorian culture are crucial in the development of the Gothic genre. Just as political or economic factors may influence the style, content, and format of a literary genre, even more influential is the society in which the literature is written. The prominence of the supernatural and psychology in Victorian culture led to texts that addressed both themes simultaneously, leading to ambiguity within the texts.

This ambiguity can be clearly seen in two texts selected from the U.S. Gothic canon, written within ten years of one another: Henry James's novella *The Turn of the Screw* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper." These two texts demonstrate the way the themes of the supernatural and madness have become a staple in Gothic fiction. By examining issues of Spiritualism, Freudian theory, and women's medicine in *The Turn of the Screw* and "The Yellow Wallpaper," readers and scholars alike can see the ways in which Victorians attempted to understand madness by manifesting it in the supernatural—and attempted to understand the supernatural as a psychological phenomenon.

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## **Mind the Ghosts: Introductions to Spiritualism and Victorian Psychology**

Gothic literature began in the mid-eighteenth century with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, which is widely considered to be the first true work of Gothic fiction ("The Castle of Otranto"). However, the genre didn't truly take off until the Victorian era, which spanned most of the nineteenth century. While some may attribute the genre's sudden gain in popularity to a shift in the interests of writers and artists, it is impossible to ignore the various social factors that influenced the eerie genre's uprising. The truth behind the influence of Gothic literature can be found in two of its most common themes: the supernatural and madness. When reading and reviewing Gothic texts, the prevalence of ghosts, mysterious apparitions, and unexplainable sounds and events is apparent. Just as frequent, however, is the theme of insanity—of hallucinations, anxiety, and complete mental breakdown—particularly in Gothic texts' weakest female characters. Although the occurrences of insanity and the supernatural may seem coincidental or unrelated, a closer examination of the culture surrounding such literature tells a different story.

The themes that occur in literature are almost always a direct result of the society in which the author is immersed. As the Victorian era progressed, the practice of Spiritualism began to grow, both in practice and in notoriety. Because of this spike in interest, the frequency of séances and supernatural phenomenon soon drew the attention of the public. However, as interest in the world beyond began to grow, so did interest in the world within. The emergence of psychological theories in the late Victorian era, such as Eduard von Hartmann's *The Philosophy of the Unconscious*, laid the foundations for the development of the ideologies which would eventually lead to modern psychology, such as Freud's invention of psychoanalysis ("Eduard van Hartmann"). The emergence of

such psychological theories led to a piqued interest in the human mind among Victorians. As ideas about the human mind became more and more developed, they also became a more prominent topic in social circles. The influences of Spiritualism and psychoanalysis in Victorian popular culture did not confine itself to parlor talk, however. As Victorian authors and artists began to incorporate these themes into their works, the Gothic genre began to take shape.

There is no doubt about Victorians' deep fascination with the supernatural. The supernatural was not merely a form of entertainment, of chilling ghost stories before bedtime, but an "important aspect of the Victorians' intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and imaginative worlds, and took its place in the domestic centre of their daily lives" (Bown, Burdett, and Thurschwell 2). While debates over accounts of unexplained, paranormal occurrences pervaded parlor talk, the influence of the supernatural over Victorian life was not limited to the social sphere. The supernatural invaded Victorian culture as well, permeating "literature, art and science—to name only three of the most powerful cultural forces" (Bown et al 2). The supernatural's influence over literature led to the complex genre of the Victorian ghost story. While the typical ghost story may seem simple in its purpose and execution, the Victorian ghost story operated on two separate levels: entertainment and cultural commentary. The Victorian ghost story was largely domestic in nature, often set inside the home. As pointed out by Eve M. Lynch, "ghost stories offered evidence that the home was no haven from powerful and exacting social pressures" (67). The Victorian ghost story became a way for cultural issues, particularly cultural criticism, to be addressed without any kind of confrontation. Stories of this genre "often stress the conjunction of external, and by extension public, class status and



internal, private matters” (Lynch 67). The genre, then, takes its horror element from two separate sources. While the threat of irrational, unexplained, supernatural forces creates dread on a superficial level, the underlying social criticism arouses distress on a personal level. The literary use of the supernatural to present social criticism in a direct, yet subtle fashion soon turned the Victorian ghost story into “a vehicle for...what was truly scary in private and public life...what could not be hidden in the domestic comfort of the hearth” (Lynch 84).

An example of social issues addressed by Gothic texts can be seen in “Ralph the Bailiff” by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, which utilizes the ghost story in order to comment on women’s “helpless” position in Victorian culture, “[directing] her sympathies into the plight of the woman with no marital property rights and no familial control” (Lynch 75; 77). Unknowingly married to a murderer being blackmailed by his manservant, the story’s protagonist, Jenny, is haunted by “hallucinations of the dead” and unsettling dreams that “[whisper] of her husband’s guilt” (Lynch 75). The hallucinations eventually lead her to overhear a conversation between her husband and his blackmailer, Ralph, which reveals the truth behind her husband’s past. After she discovers that her husband’s estate, including her dowry, is being seized by his blackmailing manservant, Jenny realizes that the only way to escape being controlled by Ralph is to flee. By doing so, she loses the only “property she [brought] into her marriage,” leaving her penniless (Lynch 77). Jenny’s plight is an example of “demonic domestic possession,” which uses the supernatural to examine the limitations of Victorian women, especially within the confines of marriage (Lynch 75). In light of the impact of the supernatural on literature

and cultural discourse, it is imperative that the factors contributing to the rise of the supernatural in Victorian culture be examined.

Heightened Victorian interest in the supernatural is attributed largely to the Spiritualist movement. According to Richard Noakes, the sudden rise of interest in the supernatural during the Victorian period has been largely unexplained by scholars (23). At that time, it appeared that the majority of the Victorian populace had given over to the idea that “the cosmos was governed by immutable natural laws rather than capricious supernatural agencies or divine whim, and...supernatural beliefs were increasingly dismissed as superstition” (Noakes 23). It was perhaps this scientific assessment of the universe, however, which allowed for the growth of the Spiritualist movement. Spiritualist practitioners, while seemingly engrossed in superstitious babble and exaggerated misconceptions about the natural world, were actually quite driven to uncover the logical, scientific forces behind the supernatural phenomena they encountered. As explained by William James, the brother of author Henry James, in his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the supernatural was an integral part of the physical world. He explains, “the unseen region in question...produces effects in our world...that which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself, so I feel as if we [have] no philosophic reason for calling the unseen or mystical world unreal” (461). Spiritualists felt strongly about not only the existence of the supernatural realm, but its importance to the human experience. The movement’s emphasis on the supernatural as a scientific field soon brought it into the public eye.

The seemingly whimsical ideas of the Spiritualist movement created a stir as they “[threatened] a revival of a superstition that [was] anathema to the proponents of

Enlightenment” (Cooper 43). In their quest for logical reasoning, Spiritualists attempted to rationalize the irrational. They tried to define the supernatural, “a category that defies definition, a realm the human mind cannot conceive” (Bown et al 9). The true danger of Spiritualist agenda and the subsequent emergence of Gothic literature was its potential to “transform readers into...irrational...creatures” (Cooper 43-44). As the movement began to pursue scientific explanation for what had once been dismissed as mere superstition, the distinction between “absurdity” and “authenticity” became increasingly blurred.

It is important to keep in mind that this time period was also the era that saw the minds of brilliant scientists whose ideas and inventions changed the scientific world. Among those scientists were James Prescott Joule, Michael Faraday, and William Thomson (“lord Kelvin”), whose research created scientific advancements such as the Laws of Thermodynamics, the creation of “electric current from a magnetic field,” and the “foundations of modern physics” respectively (“James Prescott Joule;” “Michael Faraday;” “William Thomson, Baron Kelvin”). In an age that saw such a productive scientific community, the Spiritualists’ claims about the scientific nature of their work inspired heavy criticism from the esteemed scientific world. The Spiritualist drive for scientific validity led to “fierce scientific, intellectual and theological debates over the boundaries between science and Spiritualism” (Noakes 24). For example, one scientific explanation of ghosts and other supernatural phenomena contended that the apparition was merely a “subjective optical effect” due to the deficiencies in an individual’s eyesight (Smajić 18). The connection such debates drew between Spiritualism and science “opened up new paths into the occult by virtue of its explorations of objects and phenomena that elude the limited register of the bodily senses” (Smajić 137). The

scientific community's apparent interest in Spiritualist claims led the public to see Spiritualism and the supernatural as viable explanations for unexplained phenomena. It is perhaps the dense debate over the reality or fiction of supernatural experience that creates the unique style of horror found in Gothic literature.

When examining a work of Gothic literature it is important to keep in mind the Realist foundation of the genre. While the themes presented and events portrayed in Gothic literature may be largely unrealistic, the genre is meant to be understood in a very realistic sense. Therefore, the "Gothic supernatural appears very real, disturbing, and uncanny" (Bayer-Berenbaum 32). The portrayal of events in Gothic fiction is meant to make the reader feel as if those exact events could easily happen to them. The Gothic supernatural feels real and disturbs the reader not because of its horrific quality, but because "it is so close; it permeates" (Bayer-Berenbaum 32). The division between what is natural and what is other-worldly is dissolved, "[rendering] the supernatural greater and nearer," creating a "materialization of the spiritual" through the depiction of supernatural phenomena (Bayer-Berenbaum 33). Like the debates sparked by the emergence of Spiritualist beliefs and endeavors, the Gothic supernatural attempts to take the unreal and make it real. Therefore, the true terror of the Gothic supernatural is not the idea of horrific specters or unexplainable sights and sounds, but the degree of reality that is achieved by the Gothic style. As summed up by Linda Bayer-Berenbaum, "Gothic terror" is created by a "merger of the natural and the supernatural that undermines a sound, predictable reality" (35).

The psychological process behind what makes a particular visage or event scary is examined by father of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud in his essay "The Uncanny."

Freud first establishes the understanding that the familiar is comforting and inviting, while the unfamiliar—the uncanny—produces a sense of fear; however, the kind of unfamiliarity that makes one uncomfortable is the feeling generated by seeing something that was once familiar become unfamiliar. The feeling of fear, referred to as the uncanny effect, is often the result of reality and fantasy coming in too close contact with one another. Freud argues that “an uncanny effect is often and easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality, such as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality” (50). The appearance of a supposedly unreal entity, such as a specter, in a very real setting, such as a home, is the irresolvable event that triggers an uncanny effect.

Freud is not the only one to examine the supernatural under a psychological microscope. In fact, there is a tendency, even among literary critics, to review the supernatural elements of Gothicism as a manifestation of mental breakdown or illness rather than a real event. In Gothic literature, the narrator or protagonist almost always spends some time of his or her account attempting to rationalize their ghostly encounters. It is this trope that brings Gothic literature to “[enter] the haunt of the psychological” (Bayer-Berenbaum 38). The addition of psychological interpretation to Gothic text creates an entirely new layer of analysis. The assumption that the ghosts are real, in adherence to the Realist nature of Gothic literature, leaves the reader with only one possibility—the haunting is in fact a real event occurring in a real place. However, once psychological theories are introduced to the text, its entire interpretation becomes altered.

The principles of psychology in the early Victorian era were extremely primitive in light of modern psychology. As opposed to counseling or even the famed “rest cure,”

patients found to suffer from mental illness were attempted to be cured through various forms of “drug therapy,” which included the use of “alteratives, counterirritants, astringents, diuretics, purgatives, sedatives, stimulants, and tonics,” depending on the patient’s affliction (Fee 640). Those who did not improve after undergoing drug therapy were eventually admitted to an asylum, a mental hospital that was set up to resemble a “family” setting in order to encourage patients to “[regress] to infantile existence” so that they could experience a simulated “moral upbringing aimed at reconstituting the psyche” (Fee 640). This archaic approach to mental health began to die out as Freud’s theories came to revolutionize the way the medical world understood the human mind. Freud theorizes that each person’s psyche was divided into three parts—the id, the ego, and the superego. The id refers to the basic instincts present in every human being; meanwhile the superego handles rational factors such as morality, social mores, and taboos. With the id and the superego each trying to force its own way, it becomes the responsibility of the ego to find a balance between the two extremes. Although Freud offered a more logical approach to psychology, more experimental forms of psychology also began to surface during the era. The Victorian period saw a “growing interest in dynamic models of psychology...such as hypnotism, telepathy and other aspects of psychical research” (Davis 208). With such unorthodox methods for studying the human psyche, psychical research was often associated with the supernatural activities of Spiritualists. However, psychical researchers often made a point to “assert [their] distance from Spiritualism” whenever possible, as they believed their work to be superior to that of Spiritualists (Luckhurst 198).

The emergence of psychology in the Victorian period eventually led writers to incorporate theories about the mind's inner workings into their texts. Davis notes that writers incorporated limited perception into their understanding of character identity: "A particular focus of attention among these writers was on the possibilities of the conscious mind. Their theories of consciousness and perception played a significant role...in ongoing reconceptualizations of the self" (209). The perceptions exhibited by these characters were often presented as distortions of pre-existing ideologies and institutions. As explained by Linda Bayer-Berenbaum, "mental and nervous disorders are excellent themes for Gothic stories because the illusions of the deranged often resemble traditional beliefs and superstitions" (38). This view of the text not only discredits the narrator, but also the genre itself as one of supernatural horror. Instead, each scene involving the supernatural becomes questionable. For example, when the protagonist sees a ghost, the event can no longer be taken at face value. The reader must instead question if the ghost really exists, or if some underlying mental or nervous disorder is causing the character to hallucinate. As seen in Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Tell-Tale Heart," the protagonist believes he hears the sound of a beating heart underneath the floor boards of his house. However, the sound is merely a hallucination driven by the man's guilty conscience after killing the old man he is living with and hiding the dismembered body under the floorboards. Some critics may argue that the duality of Gothic literature as a genre of both supernatural horror and insanity is largely intentional. It is possible that, instead of contributing the similarities between supernatural experience and insanity to coincidence, we must consider the possibility that "Gothic novelists [were] particularly fond of...visionary experiences, and extrasensory perceptions," allowing their readers

access to “the secret recesses of the mind” (Bayer-Berenbaum 25). By intentionally constructing a psychological layer to their work, Gothic writers were able to “appeal to skeptical academics” while utilizing the supernatural elements of their work to “aim at believers’ hearts more than their minds” (Cooper 130). Both the intellectual scholar and the casual reader could be interested and entertained by the author’s work, widening his or her audience significantly.

Just like the aforementioned Victorian ghost story sought to present cultural criticism, it can be argued that the Gothic “as a literary movement...presents psychological values, attitudes, and symbols that compensate for the one-sided values and beliefs of the dominant...culture” (Brennan 1). Gothic fiction provides an alternative view of Victorian culture, offering its readers a fresh look at the various virtues and ideologies that their culture promotes, such as the idea of women as the subordinate sex. For example, many works of Gothic fiction appear to have feminist undertones. The patriarchal society of the Victorian period allowed women little license when it came to deciding their own futures or allowing them the same freedoms as men. It is for this reason that tales of Gothic heroines generally carry the understanding that one of the heroine’s main struggles is with her desire to “appease and free [herself] from the excesses of male and patriarchal dominance” (Hogle 5). The much overlooked plight of the Victorian woman is then directly addressed in Gothic fiction.

Gothic fiction also addresses these social criticisms through its use of the supernatural. Kelly Hurley explains:

...the Gothic can serve as a sort of historical or sociological index: if the genre serves to manage a culture’s disturbances and traumatic changes, its



thematic preoccupations will allow us to track social anxieties at one remove, in the register of supernaturalism. Psychoanalytical interpretations of the Gothic are also concerned with the ways in which social anxieties are supernaturalized and rendered in displaced form. (197)

Hurley means that the ways in which authors of Gothic fiction portray the supernatural directly reflect current social issues. Following the example of feminism in a patriarchal society, a woman may be tormented by a male ghost. The author's decisions regarding the nature of the haunting and the manner in which she is haunted could act as a symbolic representation of the way patriarchal society treats women. In this way, the supernatural and psychology exist side by side in Gothic fiction just as they did in Victorian culture.

The themes and symbols of Gothic literature are undoubtedly the result of the culture surrounding it. Just as political or economic factors may influence the style, content, and format of a literary genre, even more influential is the society in which the literature is written. The prominence of the supernatural and psychology in Victorian culture led to texts that addressed both themes simultaneously, leading to ambiguity within the texts. The theme of ambiguity can be clearly seen in two texts selected from the U.S. Gothic canon, written within ten years of one another. The first is a novella by Henry James entitled *The Turn of the Screw*. *The Turn of the Screw* is told as a first-person narrative through the eyes of a young governess who is just arriving at Bly, a large country estate where she will be taking care of two children. Early in her stay, she notices an imposing looking man staring down at her from the top of one of the manor's towers. From then on she is plagued by him, Quint, and a female ghost named Miss Jessel. Over the course of the novella's development, the governess becomes irritable,

paranoid, and manic, leading the reader to believe that she may be going mad instead of being haunted. The novella's ending is just as ambiguous as the rest of the text, giving no clue as to the governess's mental state. The second work is "The Yellow Wallpaper," a short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. In it Gilman criticizes the rest cure, a treatment commonly prescribed to women suffering from emotional or anxiety disorders. Gilman's narrator is deeply offended by the senseless pattern and horrid color of the wallpaper of the guest bedroom of the country house in which she and her husband are staying while she recovers from the emotional and mental stress of childbirth. Slowly, the wallpaper seems to come to life, revealing a woman trapped behind the pattern. Unlike James's novella, the ambiguity of Gilman's tale lasts until the very end, when the author makes it clear that the protagonist has gone indisputably mad.

These two texts, written towards the end of the nineteenth century, demonstrate the way the themes of the supernatural and madness have become a staple in Gothic fiction. Due to the influence of social culture on artists and writers, these themes permeate Gothic media. However, the way these two themes can be understood through one another is what makes the genre unique. By examining Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," readers and scholars alike can see the ways in which Victorians attempted to understand madness by manifesting it in the supernatural—and attempted to understand the supernatural as a psychological phenomenon.

### **To Haunt or Not to Haunt: Ambiguity and Spirits in *The Turn of the Screw***

Henry James is arguably one of the most important American authors of the late Victorian period. Over the course of his lifetime, James authored over 150 plays, novels, and short stories. His most controversial work, however, is undoubtedly his novella *The Turn of the Screw*, originally published in 1898. The late 1890s found James in his “experimental phase,” during which he published many works of indistinct nature, which hover somewhere between the realms of Realism and Modernism (McWhirter 122-123). *The Turn of the Screw* was written during what Aviva Briefel refers to as “the golden age of the ghost story,” causing it not only to incorporate “Victorian literary and cultural clichés,” but also to explore the “construct” of Victorian thought (Briefel 161). The work describes the disturbing supernatural experiences of a young governess as she cares for two children, Flora and Miles. Shortly after arriving at her employer’s manor, she begins to see specters in the house and gardens who appear to have some kind of connection with the children she has been charged to govern. The longer she stays at the manor, the more frequent and vicious the ghosts’ behavior seems to become. The tale’s conclusion leaves the reader with many questions and few answers, as the concluding death of one of the children can be seen as a result of the governess’s final confrontation with the male ghost, Quint, or of the governess’s loving yet smothering embrace.

In the novella’s preface, we learn that the governess’s tale is being read at a social gathering from her own manuscript of the events at Bly. Though the governess is described as alive and well at the beginning of the novella, which is set after the events of the main story line, it has been suggested by a vast number of critics that her mental stability remains questionable over the course of events in the novel. The ghosts’ reality

has been a topic of discussion by critics since the novella's publication, with some believing that the specters are real and others maintaining that the governess is merely hallucinating as a result of outside stressors in her personal life. The existence of the manuscript itself is highly relevant to the question of the governess's mental state. She is clearly stable enough to offer a detailed account of the events at Bly, as least from her perspective. However, although the account is written in her own words and the events of the story are told according to her own understanding, the only point of view readers receive is that of the governess, limiting the scope of the novella. Ultimately, it is the novella's ambiguity which makes it relevant to the question of the supernatural and madness as simultaneous products of the Victorian mindset.

The less promoted interpretation of *The Turn of the Screw* is that the apparitions seen by the governess are in fact real. Many critics point to James's interest in the supernatural and occult as a sign that the ghosts are not figments of a vulnerable young woman's mind, but are instead genuine supernatural beings. According to Peter G. Beidler, James was not only acutely aware of the rising social interest in supernatural phenomena of the Victorian era, but was in fact very closely associated with those at the movement's forefront, including Henry Sidgwick and Frederic Myers, both of whom are founders of the Society for Psychical Research (38). William James was also a prominent member of the group, acting as its president for two years and its vice-president for nearly two decades (38). The Society was widely known for its involvement in paranormal investigations, such as the confirmation or condemnation of self-proclaimed psychics (Tuveson 784). The group also fostered its own ideas about the human mind and mentality, which acted as "an alternative to the whole structure of post-

Lockean, mechanistic psychology” of the time (784). Roughly four years before the publication of *The Turn of the Screw*, Edward White Benson, a friend of Henry James and co-creator of the Cambridge Ghost Club, apparently inspired James to write the novella by regaling him with “ghost [stories]” of his own (Biedler 39). Therefore, James’s involvement with the paranormal community not only influenced his work, but also fostered it.

However, *The Turn of the Screw* was not born simply from the influence of James’s peers, but out of James’s personal interests in the world unknown. James expressed a heightened interest in the literature and study of the supernatural, sharpening his understanding of its role in society (Banta, “Henry James and ‘The Others’” 174). Despite the prevalence of Spiritualism in the Victorian era, James believed America to be “stripped bare of the supernatural” (174). However, this cultural blandness ultimately provided James with a blank canvas on which he could create a supernatural fantasy (174). James’s fascination with the paranormal provided him with the foundations to formulate and write supernaturally-charged works such as *The Turn of the Screw*. He soon found that by utilizing the abstract concepts of “spectrality,” it was possible to portray events and ideas in a sinister light, making them feel eerie or “ghostly” (Despotopoulou and Reed 6).

In order to understand the supernatural aspect of *The Turn of the Screw*, one must first understand the context in which it was written. When the novella was first published, it was widely accepted as a ghost story containing real ghosts. However, as society’s awareness of psychoanalytical theories began to increase, this interpretation of the text became muddled and overshadowed by newer, more modern interpretations.

Martha Banta explains that “as superstition disappears in the daily lives of those who read James, so does their ability to consider the possibility that the ghosts they know do not exist in the world could exist in the pages of a story” (*Henry James and the Occult* 116). At the time of the book’s publication, James was highly aware that his readers wanted ghosts, wanted to be scared. Because of this demand, James wrote many supernatural tales, including “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes,” “The Friends of the Friends,” and, of course, *The Turn of the Screw*. Kathy Gentile suggests that “most Jamesian texts can be charted on a ‘reality’-supernatural continuum ranging from an occasional outbreak of the uncanny in a...grounded fictional world to explicitly supernatural fictions” (98). Some of James’s texts, such as the aforementioned “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes,” act as straightforward, frightening ghost stories, with no question as to the reality of their specters. However, works such as *The Turn of the Screw* allow the reader to question the true ghostliness of the novel, as they incorporate supernatural elements without verifying them. The supernatural nature of *The Turn of the Screw* is not only implied by the conditions under which it was written, but also is conveyed by the text itself. The text is teeming with passages that indicate the ghosts are not hallucinations, but actual beings that appear to the governess.

The governess’s first encounter with a spirit at Bly occurs as she walks the gardens one afternoon. As she turns to the house, she sees a figure standing at the top of one of the manor’s towers. While the governess does not realize the threat the strange man poses to her at the time, she does note that he makes her feel uneasy. The man’s appearance is accompanied by “an intense hush” that extinguishes even the smallest of sounds (James 16). This same hush falls during the governess’s other encounters with the

specters at Bly, suggesting that the hush may be the result of paranormal activity associated with the ghostly figures. The governess later realizes that the figure continued to look at her even after he had turned away, indicating that the stranger was not a normal human being, but something otherworldly (17). The “fixed stare” seen here is considered by Beidler to be a basic characteristic of the “standard ghost” (77, 83). He notes that the blank gaze the governess often receives from the male ghost, Quint, is a common occurrence in real-life accounts of those claiming to have encountered a ghost (83). There would have been many such accounts filed away in the Society for Psychical Research archives, which would have been easily accessible for James through his friends at the Society (76). Had James been trying to create a realistic, believable ghost story, it’s possible that he would have approached his peers in the Spiritualist world for guidance.

The man on the tower does not appear again until a rainy Sunday afternoon. The governess sees a figure, whom she identifies as the mysterious man she saw standing at the top of the tower, peering in one of the manor’s windows. She describes the man’s sudden, unexpected reappearance as having a certain “nearness” which makes her “turn cold” (James 20). A sudden drop in temperature is almost always associated with ghostly encounters, and James’s inclusion of this detail is likely meant to add to the supernatural elements already forming in the story’s plot. After this next encounter, the governess desperately tells the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose, about her experience. Though Mrs. Grose tries to explain away the strange incident, the governess tells her the man’s identity blatantly, saying “What is he? He’s a horror!” (22). The mysterious man, whom Mrs. Grose identifies as Quint, a former valet at the manor, does not remain the only spirit at

the manor for long. He is soon joined by the spirit of Miss Jessel, the children's previous governess.

Miss Jessel first appears as the governess takes the children to play by the lake. Here, we see James's utilization of the "felt presence of ghosts" (Beidler 93). Quite a few cases of ghost sightings include the individual being haunted "feeling" the presence of a ghost before actually visually seeing it (93). Beidler argues that, while the governess's awareness of Miss Jessel's presence before she actually sees her might seem to support the theory that she has gone mad, the prevalence of the phenomena in cases of ghost sightings gives it legitimacy as a supernatural occurrence (93). After sensing a presence, the governess looks up to see a figure standing across the lake, watching her and the children intently. The governess is immediately suspicious of this figure, describing her as a being "whose right of presence [she] instantly, passionately questioned" (James 28). This encounter is also accompanied by a loss of sound, as the governess remarks that the sounds of Flora playing nearby had "dropped" (29). When she tells Mrs. Grose about the woman she saw at the lake, she describes her as "a figure of...unmistakable horror and evil" who she believes has a "fury of intention" against herself and the children (30-31). Miss Jessel's appearance is only another element of the terror the governess senses in the house. Since hearing mysterious sounds on her first day at the manor, she feels that there is "something astir" in the manor (39).

As her stay at the manor lengthens, the governess's feeling of dread become greater and greater and the spirits' activity becomes more and more pronounced. Another visit from Quint brings him closer to her than he has ever been. The two meet by chance late at night on a staircase and stare at each other, unmoving, for a lengthy amount of



time. This is a second, more pronounced instance of the “fixed stare” discussed earlier. As the governess’s experiences with the ghosts at Bly become more significant, the magnitude of classic ghost behavior also intensifies. Though this encounter is more significant in substance than the governess’s previous experiences with Quint’s spirit, she also notes that, though she feels “plenty of anguish” over the incident later on, she feels “no terror” when confronted with the impending threat of the spirits at Bly directly (40). It is perhaps this newfound confidence which motivates the governess to confront Miss Jessel in the schoolroom one afternoon. Though she does not expect to find the woman there, the specter’s presence in the governess’s seat sends her into a haze of anger, in which she calls the ghost a “terrible, miserable woman” (58).

As the governess grows less and less tolerant of the ghosts’ antics, they begin to harass the children, as well. Miles hints that he may know something about the specters when he refers to the “queer business” going on around the manor, though he never specifies what that business is (61). Furthermore, a candle is inexplicably blown out during a quarrel between Miles and the governess, announcing the ghosts’ presence, though Miles claims it was he who blew out the candle, to the governess’s disbelief (64). The governess soon comes to realize that the ghosts of Quint and Miss Jessel have been visiting the children on a regular basis and becomes consumed by anger and protective instincts, raging to guard the children from harm. Though Flora blatantly denies having ever seen the ghost of Miss Jessel after yet another confrontation at the lake, Mrs. Grose confides to the governess that she believes Flora has indeed seen the woman at other times since the woman’s death, as the little girl says and does things that are extremely unseemly for a girl her age (75). The governess sends the girl away from the manor with

Mrs. Grose for her protection, intending to confront Miles about the strange occurrences at Bly once and for all. Quint also shows up for the confrontation, appearing in the window of the dining room and lingering there for the entirety of the conversation. Finally, Miles confronts the spirits, first calling for Miss Jessel and then seeking out Quint ferociously. He calls “Peter Quint—you devil! ... Where?,” frantically trying to find Quint in the room (86). When he finally sees Quint’s image in the window, the shock and horror he feels is too much for him to bear, and he falls into the governess’s arms—dead.

After James’s own death, A. R. Orage commented that “James was in love with the next world...he was always exploring the borderland between the conscious and the superconscious” (qtd in Banta, “Henry James and ‘The Others’” 181). Works such as *The Turn of the Screw*, which explore the possibilities of the supernatural world and the boundaries of the natural world, are the direct result of James’s fascination with the paranormal universe. Banta explains that “it was in this borderland that James’s ghosts walked, there to be encountered by the living” (“Henry James and ‘The Others’” 181). Pericles Lewis claims that Henry James “[takes] the experience of the supernatural at face value and [does] not try to ascribe to it straightforward underlying causes,” meaning the only way to properly read and understand *The Turn of the Screw* is by adhering to the ghost story interpretation (36).

While the novella gives evidence to the spirits’ reality, especially in context with James’s own ideas regarding the supernatural, other passages indicate that the spirits are figments of the governess’s imagination. The duality of the text leads most modern critics to assess the governess as mad, a victim of her own unstable psyche. If the ghosts

at Bly are indeed imagined, a new aspect of the governess is brought into question—that of her sanity. Some critics raise the idea that the governess, affected by factors outside the manor, falls into madness upon her arrival at Bly. Charles G. Hoffmann, for example, notes that the governess’s discourse is calm and collected during her journey to Bly (80). Nothing appears to be wrong until it is suggested that there may be “something unmentionable or abnormal” about Miles in the letter dismissing him from school (80). It is from this moment that the idea of abnormality at Bly enters her mind, takes root, and begins to grow and manifest, leading to her eventual madness. In fact, it can be argued that this moment of doubt is the point at which the governess begins to fall into madness. This madness is in turn expressed by her hallucinations of Quint and Miss Jessel in combination with her feelings of extreme paranoia, which are seen early on in the novella. Because the governess’s actions indicate that she is slowly losing her mental faculties, it becomes difficult to decipher the reality of the figures she sees around the manor, suggesting that they are figments of her imagination.

The introduction to the story builds the framework for her inevitable mental breakdown. The teller of the story explains that a heartbreak in her past is somehow tied to her experiences at the manor, saying “She was in love. That is, she had been. That came out—she couldn’t tell her story without it coming out” (James 3). This passage indicates that the governess is already suffering from some kind of emotional stress or depression even before her arrival at Bly. The circumstances behind this pain are unclear, but it is demonstrated that the event had a very strong effect on her, as she cannot fully tell the story without including the heartbreak as well. It is implied in the text that the governess feels an emotional attraction to the children’s uncle, her employer. Although

never verified by the text, it is possible that the emotional stress associated with her desire to impress him may have contributed to her mental duress. Furthermore, the governess's emotional distress is magnified by a lack of life experience, leaving her especially vulnerable to the stress that comes with her responsibility to look after the children. She is described as "young, untried, [and] nervous..." and she is aware that her new position will involve "serious duties" and "great loneliness" (5). Even the governess herself acknowledges that she may not be emotionally or mentally prepared for the task ahead of her, saying she feels "indeed sure [she] had made a mistake" (6).

It is no wonder that, considering the governess's multiple stress factors, she soon becomes easily upset and worried about the activities around her. Oscar Cargill explains that, due to mental and emotional stressors, the governess "possesses a mind singularly open to evil suggestion" (19-20). Her weakened mental state makes her mind ready to accept any input it receives as fact. After receiving numerous upsetting letters from home, she openly admits that the children have become a distraction for her, indicating that she is in strong denial of her heartbreak and the problems associated with her family. This admission only strengthens the argument that the ghosts are merely a manifestation of her mental instability. As noted by Shlomith Rimmon in *The Concept of Ambiguity: The Example of James*, many critics who believe the ghosts to be figments find this information to be the most pertinent in the novella, as it proves that she is "sufficiently sleepless and...overwrought to invite hallucinations" (150).

The governess's mental problems present themselves subtly at first, then rapidly escalate as her stay at the manor lengthens. From the beginning of her stay at Bly, the governess immediately throws herself into the lives of her charges, even to the point that

she exhibits a strange possessiveness over them. She has only known Flora for several days before referring to her as “my little girl” and is constantly admiring her, either openly or from a distance (James 7). The governess fawns over Flora and often shows her sudden, intense forms of affection, such as “catching [Flora] in [her] arms” and leaving her “covered her with kisses” (11). Her affection for Miles manifests in a similar way. Upon meeting the child, she notes that “everything but a sort of passion of tenderness for him was swept away by his presence” and claims that he exudes “an air of knowing nothing in the world but love” (13). This overwhelming affection for the children is perhaps a primary catalyst for her consequent mental breakdown. The more she grows to love the children, the more she uses them as a shield from her heartache and the more fearful she becomes of losing them in any way. Because of these fears, she begins to imagine danger and secrecy in the manor, making herself paranoid. Bruce McElderry explains that this paranoia endows the governess with a personal “mission: she must protect the children” (118). Her acceptance of this mission leads her to become increasingly more suspicious of the children’s whereabouts, believing that they are secretly meeting with Quint and Miss Jessel at night or when her back is turned.

Reflecting on the time she has spent at Bly, the governess describes the happy, early days of her time at Bly as “a trap” intended to lull her into a false sense of security (James 14). This is one of the governess’s first expressions of her paranoia, which only grows stronger and more pronounced as the novella goes on. Once the ghosts manifest themselves, the governess becomes increasingly suspicious of those around her. After her first encounter with Quint, the governess becomes possessed by the unnerving effect the encounter had on her. By the time she encounters the specter again, she notices that she

feels comfortable with him, as if she knows him. This feeling of familiarity may result from her constant reflection on their first encounter. However, those who adhere to the interpretation of insanity over supernaturalism point out that it is important to keep in mind that her feelings of familiarity may also come from a much simpler source—the fact that she has created him herself. Banta explains this concept frankly when she says “...[the ghosts] were not complete surprises to her; she had already met them in her romantic imagination before encountering them as ghostly presences” (*Henry James and the Occult* 130). Furthermore, while the governess’s feeling of ease may be taken as a sign that she finds Quint trustworthy, it is important to note that she feels only personally unthreatened by him. Instead, she notes that she suspects Quint intends to do harm to the children. She is convinced that the children can and have seen Quint and Miss Jessel wandering the property. Because of Mrs. Grose’s tales of the pair’s indiscretion, the governess becomes convinced that they intend to corrupt the children. As demonstrated by Hoffmann, the children “betray themselves” through their association with Quint and Miss Jessel, in which the children are “incautious...in an evil environment” (84). The governess recognizes, or believes she recognizes, that the naïve lack of awareness the children have for their own safety is actually negligence among the children for their safety. Her fear for the children’s well-being acts as a catalyst for the governess’s paranoia.

For a short time, the governess believes that she is the only one fated to be tormented by the appearances of the ghosts. Mrs. Grose, the governess’s confidant, “had seen nothing, not the shadow of a shadow” (James 24). With Mrs. Grose as the only other prominent adult figure in the story, it seems that “nobody in the house but the

governess [is] in the governess's plight" (24). Out of her fear that she will somehow lose the children, the governess develops the belief that the ghosts are determined to corrupt or otherwise take them away from her. She decides to become a guardian of the children's "tranquility" and act self-sacrificially for the sake of her young charges (25). It is her dedication to the children's well-being that makes her suspicious of all those around her—even of the children themselves.

Because her information comes solely from Mrs. Grose, the governess begins to become paranoid that those around her are hiding things from her. She believes that there is information regarding Bly that has been purposefully hidden from her by both the children and the housekeeper. She suspects that Mrs. Grose is not telling her the entire story regarding Quint and describes herself as being "haunted with the shadow of something she had not told [her]" (27). This paranoia only grows after the appearance of Miss Jessel at the manor. Miss Jessel is even more of a threat to the governess because she once was the children's governess, too. This threat exists on two distinct levels: a moral level and a personal level. Walter F. Wright reminds us that, according to Mrs. Grose, Quint and Miss Jessel are "wicked" beings and "were close enough to the children to influence them" (181). Miss Jessel is a moral threat to the governess in her ability to manipulate and corrupt the children through their trust in her. Were the children to become corrupt, the governess would lose the bright, angelic children she dearly loves. On a physical level, the possibility of the children's lingering allegiance to Miss Jessel could possibly lead them away from the governess completely. If Miss Jessel is able to pull the children away, the governess will be left with no one to love and nothing to distract her from her inner turmoil. Furthermore, her attempts to impress her love

interest, the children's uncle, would result in her utter failure and thereby bring her to lose his affection as well. This fear becomes manifest just before Flora leaves the manor. The governess continues to interrogate her about her belief that Flora is visited by Miss Jessel until the girl can no longer take it and screams at her "I think you're cruel! I don't like you!" (James 71). The appearance of Miss Jessel in the manor and the threats accompanied by her arrival lead the governess to become paranoid towards her beloved children, ultimately losing her trust in them.

The governess becomes hysterical at the thought of the children lying and keeping secrets from her, crying to Mrs. Grose that "They know!" and that they also see the ghosts at Bly (29). Her loss of faith in the children becomes more and more clear as the novel heads towards its conclusion. For example, she begins to draw Mrs. Grose into her world of secrecy and paranoia by insisting that she should not ask Flora about seeing Miss Jessel in the garden, as she believes that the girl will lie. She is convinced that the children will continue to keep up their secrecy regarding the specters, including the fact that they supposedly know about the malicious intent the ghosts harbor towards them. The governess's paranoia is also seen in her hasty, automatic disbelief in anything the children tell her, especially when it involves the ghosts. After Flora behaves nervously when the governess asks her if she saw anyone roaming the grounds, the governess immediately jumps to the conclusion that the girl is lying. Her belief in the child's lie is not a casual fancy that offhandedly crosses her mind. It is instead a certainty that she feels completely, saying that she "absolutely [believes] she lied" (41).

Soon, the governess becomes suspicious even towards herself, concerned that her own actions will betray her knowledge of the ghosts to the children and turn them against



her. She remarks that, at that time, is was “easy to get into a sad, wild tangle about how much I might betray” (37). The governess’s self-distrust marks a turning point in her activity in the manor. Her failing self-awareness leads her to question even her own claims about the ghosts. Unnerved, the governess roams the manor at night after Mrs. Grose falls asleep, attempting to seek out the specters which haunt her so. The governess’s questioning of herself and the supernatural phenomena she believes she has experienced is one of the most prominent instances supporting the insanity interpretation of the novella. The greater the amount of time that passes between spectral encounters, the more distraught and frantic the governess becomes. It appears that the more the governess focuses on the ghosts at Bly, the less likely they are to appear. This indicates that the governess’s internal thought processes directly affect the supernatural phenomena at Bly. The children’s silence regarding the specters furthers her uneasiness until they become completely untrustworthy in her eyes. She soon believes that the children are not only aware of the ghosts’ presence, but also gladly welcome them as old friends. Her paranoia is seen clearly when she remarks, “How can I retrace the strange steps of my obsession? There were times of our being together when I would have been ready to swear that, literally, in my presence, but with my direct sense of it closed, they had visitors who were known and were welcome” (51).

From this point on, adherents to the insanity interpretation find that the governess slips from paranoia to pure insanity. Overwhelmed by her losing battle to protect the children and burdened by the emotional distress of her experiences at Bly, the governess can handle her fears and anguish no longer and begins to lose her mental capacity completely. She spends long periods of time in her room belaboring the situation at hand.

Her obsession with her plight eventually devolves into what appears to be a loss of control. She recalls, “I flung myself about, but I always broke down in the monstrous utterance of names” (52). Though it is never explained whose names she is uttering, it is likely that they are the names of the children, the ghosts, or the man who caused her heartache. She begins to believe that the children are fighting a greater battle than she, deducing that they are more harassed by the ghosts than she previously thought. She remarks, “...whatever I had seen, Miles and Flora saw more—things terrible and unguessable and that sprang from dreadful passages of intercourse in the past. Such things naturally left...a chill which we vociferously denied that we felt” (52). This passage indicates that, though she does not trust the children, she does think that whatever she experiences, they experience even more severely. Because of this belief, she grows ever more protective of Miles and Flora. Miss Jessel’s aforementioned appearance in the schoolroom, seated in the governess’s seat, brings the governess to assume that Miss Jessel has dug her clutches into Flora. The governess’s desire to protect the children, her aforementioned distraction from the emotional pain she is experiencing, ultimately leads to destruction.

The final scene between Miles, the governess, and Quint is one of the most controversial moments in the novella, as James offers absolutely no definitive explanation for the Miles’s fate. As told by the governess, Miles is shocked when he turns and sees Quint standing at the window. In order to shield him from the sight and protect him from Quint’s evil, the governess holds him close to her chest. She is too late, however, because the terrifying image of Quint at the window has been too much for the boy, and he has died of fright. This scene can be interpreted to support both the

supernatural interpretation and the madness interpretation of the novella. When considering the novella from a supernatural standpoint, the governess's account seems perfectly plausible. The idea that, after being plagued by his governess about the ghosts, Miles's comprehension that Quint's ghost actually does haunt Bly may have been too much for the young boy to take. However, in the context of the governess's madness, Miles's death in this scene cannot be taken as death by fright, but death by smothering from a woman who chose to love him to death. Critical assessments of the governess's exact method of killing the boy vary, however. According to Edmund Wilson, the governess has "finally convinced him either that he has actually seen or that he is just about to see some horror," and ultimately "[frightens] him to death" (120). Meanwhile, Muriel West declares, "In the final section of *The Turn of the Screw* the governess indulges in an exuberant debauch of violence that contributes to the sudden death of the little Miles—or she dreams she did" (349). The death of Miles is undoubtedly one of the most ambiguous elements of the tale, leading readers to question if the boy died despite being protected by his loving governess, or is murdered by her. However, like the rest of the novella, the truth is never clearly stated, leaving readers and critics alike to search for an answer.

Many critics would argue that, with such clear evidence that the governess is unstable, no argument can be made that she is in fact mentally sound. However, James has peppered the text with passages that can be interpreted in more than one way, allowing for the governess's mental state to become either discredited or solidified. For instance, the first description of the governess calls her a "most agreeable woman...worthy of whatever" (James 2). This introduction to the governess's character

suggests that she is a woman of sound mind who others find agreeable. The reader is given no indication of any mental disarray whatsoever, suggesting that she either experienced true horror at Bly, or has since totally recovered from her mental breakdown within the manor walls. However, the passage may also be interpreted as evidence of her faltering mental state. Oscar Cargill points out that the governess's agreeable nature is not evidence of sound mentality, but rather of mental dissonance (25). Cargill states, "There is no implication in this [statement of the governess's agreeability] that the governess is at all marked by any sorrow for young Miles who had died while in her charge—whatever the cause of his death" (25). The governess's unbothered demeanor and eagerness to tell her story to the first person to inquire demonstrates her lack of stability.

Another way James plants ambiguity in the text is through the protagonist's relationship with Mrs. Grose. The older woman's belief or disbelief of the governess's claims seem to either question the governess's mental state or reinforce the governess's claims of the ghosts' reality, depending on how the older woman feels about the information being presented to her. One such occurrence finds the governess inwardly rejoicing that Mrs. Grose believes her. Without the support of her only confidant throughout her ghostly encounters, the governess would likely have lost her resolve much earlier in the novella. Instead, she feels refreshed, saying "She believed me, I was sure, absolutely; if she hadn't I don't know what would have become of me, for I couldn't have borne the business alone" (James 44). Mrs. Grose finally admits that she accepts the governess's claims towards the end of the novel, simply saying "I believe" (76). While Mrs. Grose's support of the governess's claims seems to grant the governess legitimacy,

some critics discredit Mrs. Grose as being simple-minded. Cargill declares that “if we persist in thinking...that the apparitions are supernatural, we are more gullible even than Mrs. Grose” (18). Cargill also notes that Mrs. Grose, despite claiming to believe the governess, exhibits the foresight to remove Flora from the manor and “thus save her life” (18). Many critics may interpret the governess’s acknowledgement of the unbelievable quality of her claims as yet another indication that she understands both what is happening around her and possibly the severity of the situation. The governess admits “I go on, I know, as if I were crazy...but it has only made me more lucid, made me get ahold of still other things” (James 47). The governess believes that her experiences at Bly have not driven her insane, but quite the opposite. She sees more clearly now that she ever has before. Though the passages in which the governess explicitly defends her mental health are few, they are straightforward and purposeful. She admits that her tale may sound like that of a madwoman and that she may come across as crazy. However, she herself knows that she is mentally sound, and that everything she reports about her time at Bly is accurate, though it may be farfetched.

*The Turn of the Screw*’s ambiguity has sparked heated debate among critics since the possibility of the text’s duality was first suggested. Upon being complimented on his successful attempt at a truly horrifying ghost tale, James replied “I meant to scare the whole world with that story” (qtd in Halttunen 472). Furthermore, in interviews, articles, and reviews, James never indicated that *The Turn of the Screw* was ever intended to be more than a creepy ghost tale. According to John Lydenberg, “James’s own comments on *The Turn of the Screw*...make it reasonably clear that he intended neither a psychological study of the governess nor a religious parable... He claims that his sole interest in [the

governess] was to make her a credible reporter of Bly's horrors" (274). With such strong evidence of James's intentions when writing the novella, it seems curious that so much debate regarding the supernatural and madness in the work has arisen. Pericles Lewis attempts to explain this trend by examining James's ambiguity of the "traditional notion of 'the supernatural'" and the "emergent modern conception of 'the unconscious'" (34). He explains:

In James, the unconscious is structured rather like the supernatural. The visible, conscious world, with its familiar motives such as desire, ambition, and greed, interacts in subtle ways with an unseen realm, inaccessible to consciousness, where desire, ambition, and greed have more deep-seated, even uncanny, equivalents. This other world, whether we label it unconscious or supernatural, lies beyond our control. (34)

Because James portrays the physical world and the spiritual world in a similar light, it is easy to see the areas where James has blurred the line. Despite James's claims about his intentions when penning the work, his ultimate goals for the novella continue to be debated. Edna Kenton expresses her belief that James intended the tale to be an experience on multiple levels for multiple kinds of readers; she explains that she sees *The Turn of the Screw* "to be a kind of hoax story to test the attentiveness of [James's] readers, the lazy apprehending it only as a ghost story, the more attentive getting a deeper richness" (qtd in Cargill 16). Regardless of the nature of James's readers, it is important to understand the role the text has played in leading those readers to gain a different perspective of the supernatural.

As critics debate the true meaning of James's novella, the existence of its ghosts, and the stability of the governess's mental state, James's brother William James offers insight into what he believes is the most important concept one should take from the story. As understood by William James, *The Turn of the Screw* is most intended to make its readers realize that "the ghosts are 'real' not in their provable or disprovable existence outside the minds of the characters who encounter them, but precisely in their having an effect on those characters" (qtd in Lewis 42). Therefore, whether ghosts exist in the real world or not, the impact they have on the characters of a literary work should act as evidence that they exist in the fictional literary world. Hans-Joachim Lang backs this view and relates it to the question of the governess's sanity, noting that "James took extraordinary pains to make the reader believe in the reality of the ghosts, because only if the reader believed in them could he fail to doubt the sanity of the governess" (115). If the reader allows himself to accept the ghosts' reality, he can then better understand the character of the governess, making him less hasty to take a psychological standpoint on her situation. In truth, the ghosts of the story can only really exist once the reader allows them to. Just as is true for the question of ghosts in the real world as opposed to the fictional world, "the reality of ghosts and other apparitions depends primarily on the willingness of the denizens of this world to believe in them" (Lewis 40). Once a person has opened up his or her mind to the possibility of the supernatural as something real rather than fantastical, he is able to understand texts such as *The Turn of the Screw* as a story about ghosts, rather than about insanity. It is only then that he can fully understand both levels of the governess's narrative.

The debate over the supernatural and insanity in *The Turn of the Screw* continues with no signs of slowing. With critics unable to agree on one interpretation or the other, and their numbers only increasing as the years wear on, it is unlikely that the debate will come to a close any time in the near future. However, Lang considers that, when it comes to finding a way to appease all of the work's critics, it seems that the problem is not a matter of which interpretation is correct so much as the apparent desire among critics for a single accepted interpretation (110). As long as the text remains ambiguous, the search for clarity and the debate among critics will continue. However, due to the nature of the text, the possibility of a single interpretation is hardly likely; Lang muses that "many people will probably think that the only interpretation really wanted is an interpretation to end all interpretations. This is not likely to be provided... The story is a challenge to criticism and an index to critical methods" (110). Instead of concentrating on the lack of a definitive meaning behind the text, the text should be praised as an "excellent illustration of disjunctive ambiguity...almost every detail in the story, as Edmund Wilson admitted long ago, can be interpreted in a double sense" (110). Hazel Hutchison even goes as far as to say that "the inability to disentangle these two [interpretations] within the text is what gives it its haunting effect. For haunting is, after all, the presence of what should be absent...it is the awareness of something visible, audible, or tangible that should be confined to thought or to the past" (73). It is the work's duality that makes the text a cornerstone of not only the Victorian Gothic, but of American literature as a whole.

Though *The Turn of the Screw* is an undeniably important work to the Gothic canon, Henry James is not the only Victorian writer who raises these questions regarding



the supernatural and madness. In a similar fashion, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" deals with the same themes as James's novella. However, where *The Turn of the Screw* remains unclear regarding the connection of the supernatural and madness, "The Yellow Wallpaper" makes it very clear that the protagonist has lost her mental faculties. "The Yellow Wallpaper" therefore offers to its readers what critics of James's *The Turn of the Screw* could only have hoped for: a ghostly experience that may or may not be real, followed by closed by a definite and richly-developed fall into insanity.

## **Are You Out of Your Mind?: Representing Madness in “The Yellow Wallpaper”**

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” is, like Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, a controversial work. However, unlike James’s novella, Gilman’s short story was written intentionally to breed controversy and discussion among readers and critics. Published in 1892, “The Yellow Wallpaper” was written as a protest of the popular rest cure that was often recommended for hysterical or depressed women in the nineteenth century. The rest cure, which was prescribed to Gilman by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell as a solution to her extensive battle with depression, required female patients to exert themselves as little as possible, both physically and mentally (Thraikill 526). This meant they were to abstain from exciting activity, intellectual stress, and, in Gilman’s case, writing. The cure focused on “the body as the site of health,” as it was believed that a well-rested body would lead to a well-rested mind, rather than addressing emotional or mental distress through psychiatric means (526). It seemed that, to Gilman’s doctor, physical rest would ultimately influence the overall physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional well-being of an individual without the need for extraneous measures (526). Dr. Mitchell defended his cure by arguing that “as a rule, no harm is done by rest” (Mitchell 48). He stressed that extreme, structured rest is especially beneficial for women, as they will be eager to return to their normal routines once the treatment is over; furthermore, he warned that “the man who resolves to send any nervous woman to bed must be quite sure that she will obey him when the time comes for her to get up” (48). Mitchell’s rest cure may seem sound in its basic theory—that one who is confined to rest will regain a desire for activity and good spirits upon their release. However, the way in

which the cure sought to quiet women and place them in a particularly submissive position to men sparked controversy, especially from outspoken feminists.

By forcing women, particularly intelligent women, to sit back and allow their intellectual and artistic gifts to go to waste, women's roles in academic and creative circles became compromised. Furthermore, to completely withdraw an individual from all forms of stimulation and social interaction outside of contact one or two designated caregivers allows for the possibility of adverse effects on that individual's sanity. When taking into account women's often socially-driven roles in Victorian society, it is no wonder that removal from human interaction, not to mention society, would have adverse effects on their mental health. As asserted by Mahinur Akşehir, "nineteenth century middle-class women...were isolated, lonely, and consequently depressed" (2). This widespread depression among Victorian women likely led to an abundance of rest cures. While some women left Mitchell's treatment feeling refreshed and cured of their ailments, many felt that the cure was merely a form of "punitive rest" (Mitchell 46). It is this attitude towards the rest cure that prompted the creation of "The Yellow Wallpaper."

In 1913, twenty-two years after the first publication of "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman published a short article in her magazine *Forerunner*. The article was entitled "Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper" and not only explained Gilman's motivations when writing the short story, but also gave insight into the negative effects of the rest cure on her mental stability and recovery. In the article, Gilman explains that an unnamed physician (whom we now know is Dr. S. Weir Mitchell) instructed her to "live as domestic a life as far as possible" and "never to touch pen, brush or pencil again as long as I lived" (Gilman, "Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper" 52). This treatment lasted for

around three months before Gilman began to fear that she was “near the borderline of utter mental ruin” (52). Fed up, she discontinued Mitchell’s treatment plan and began once again to write. The familiarity and comfort she found in intellectual activity and writing slowly returned her to reality and ultimately led her to write “The Yellow Wallpaper,” which contains many elements from Gilman’s personal experiences, in order to save other women from a similar fate. “The Yellow Wallpaper”’s publication was met with somewhat mixed reviews, but Gilman was satisfied to learn that at least one woman had been rescued by her work, the woman’s family being so shaken by the text that they immediately discontinued her treatment (53). Along with her submission of the story to publishers, Gilman also sent a copy of her work to S. Weir Mitchell himself. While she received no response from him, she was later informed that her tale had prompted him to “[change] his treatment of nervous prostration” (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* 91-92). Gilman describes this victory as the “best result” of “The Yellow Wallpaper”’s success (Gilman, “Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper” 53); her work was serving its purpose in exactly the way she had intended. Gilman clarifies at the end of her article that “The Yellow Wallpaper” was “not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked” (53).

Unlike the governess of Henry James’s novella, the protagonist of Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” wavers only briefly between what could possibly be an experience of supernatural phenomena and her ultimate fate of madness. While the definitive outcome of the narrator’s sanity differs from the open-ended question of madness of Henry James’s governess, Gilman approaches the issue through a similar method as James, using supernatural elements to make the reader question if haunting or madness is the

culprit of the protagonist's predicament. By placing supernatural imagery and language alongside events and visions of questionable authenticity, Gilman implies that the instances of psychosis displayed by the protagonist may actually be perpetrated by supernatural beings or influences. However, the supernatural possibility becomes implausible as the narrator's descent into madness becomes not only likely, but indisputably real.

The protagonist's initial impression of the vacation home she and her husband inhabit while she recovers from her depression is the first instance of supernatural activity in the tale. The protagonist has been prescribed the rest cure in hopes of relieving her of the mental and emotional stress she is experiencing as a result of childbirth, and is restricted from activity by not only her husband John, who acts as her physician, but also her sister-in-law Jennie. In order to ensure his wife's full recovery, John rents out a country house for several weeks, to allow her to remain fully isolated from the stresses of society until she is completely cured. However, as the story soon shows, "the cure...is worse than the disease" and the invalid narrator's "mental condition deteriorates rapidly," rather than improving (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* 89). From the moment the story begins, the narrator expresses a desire that the house they are to live in would be haunted, though she admits that such good fortune may be "asking too much of fate" (Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" 1). However, once she arrives, she feels that there is "something strange about the house" and implies that there was once a good deal of conflict in the lives of the home's previous owners (2). Despite her efforts, she simply cannot seem to shake the eerie feeling that she senses from the old home.

It is not until the narrator begins to describe her personal bedroom in the house that the property's true nature becomes clear. She notices that the bedroom she shares with her husband has "barred" windows and describes the room as having "rings and things" hanging from the walls, "scratch[es]" and "goug[es]" in the floor, and a bed that "looks as if it had been through the wars" (3-5). Although the narrator muses that it must have once been a children's nursery or a playroom, readers may realize that the room's furnishing indicate that it may have been intended to house mental patients. As pointed out by Carol Margaret Davidson, neither of these possibilities acts as a positive sign for her mental state. Davidson notes that the "immediate and most disturbing implication is that she is infantilized in this former nursery," an implication that was likely an intentional statement by Gilman (58). Elements of the narrator's infantilization can be seen most distinctly in the way she is treated by her husband. John frequently dismisses her insights as whimsical musings, as seen when she asks to leave the house. Instead of accepting his wife's intuitions about her own psychological deterioration in the house, he dismisses her claims as invalid, speaking to her as a child and telling her to "trust [him] as a physician" (Gilman "The Yellow Wallpaper" 9). Sentenced to spend the remainder of the couple's stay in the unnerving upper room, the narrator is given no choice but to find something to occupy herself with, as she has been barred from any stimuli, especially writing. The thing, unfortunately, is her room's garish, unpleasant yellow wallpaper.

The yellow wallpaper is quite understandably the most significant characteristic of the couple's room. The protagonist finds herself constantly annoyed by the old wallpaper's senseless patterns and grotesque color, claiming "I never saw a worse paper

in my life” (3). However, because she despises it so fervently, the protagonist cannot help but be drawn in by the curious distortion that comprises the wallpaper’s design. As the narrator invests more and more of her time and energy into studying it, the wallpaper quickly becomes a gauge for the degree of the narrator’s mental deterioration. As the narrator’s mental state worsens, “the implications of both the paper and the figure imprisoned behind the paper begin to permeate—that is, to haunt—the rented ancestral mansion” (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* 90). She soon begins to see not only patterns, but also images hidden in the layers of paper and comes to believe that she can see “people walking in [those] numerous paths” across the landscapes of the pattern (Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper” 4). The more she continues to obsess about the wallpaper, the more it appears to take on a life of its own. She begins attributing human characteristics to the wallpaper, claiming that it knows “what a vicious influence” it has on her (5). The narrator’s fixation with the wallpaper quickly transitions from an acute awareness of the design’s ugly formations into a full-fledged obsession with trying to uncover the truth behind the wallpaper’s strangeness. Finally, the narrator’s questions about the wallpaper’s inhabitant(s) are answered as the images the narrator sees in the design converge into a single entity—the woman behind the wallpaper.

While the text is full of hazy information and vague allusions to the house’s history, the yellow wallpaper is the most ambiguous element of the entire short story. Critics invest as much time in the wallpaper as Gilman’s protagonist does, debating its symbolism, its supernaturalism, its role in Gilman’s feminist agenda, and even the significance of the way it smells. Most critics agree, however, that in some way the wallpaper acts as an outlet for the narrator’s frustrations and desires. The nature of this

outlet, however, has been a topic of debate since the work's publication. By setting the author's intentions aside and assessing the piece at face value, the wallpaper can be understood in many various ways. As noted by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their article "Fecundate! Discriminate!," the wallpaper has often been "interpreted as a projection of the narrator's rage (the phantom female figure behind it shakes bars to get out of patriarchal imprisonment) or as a sign of the woman's entrapment... (the puzzling design mocks all her efforts to understand its purpose and ultimately sentences her to madness)" (209). Because the protagonist is so restrained while under her husband's medical orders, she is limited in her search for an outlet for her frustrations. The protagonist, like Gilman herself, is a writer and becomes increasingly frustrated as she tries to find secret times to write. By writing down her story, the protagonist is rebelling against the rest cure, just as Gilman does in her own penning of the short story. The ready availability of the wallpaper provides her with a constant venue through which her mind can express feelings of desperation and anger.

It has been suggested by some critics that the narrator's ultimate descent into madness is one of partial choice. It is possible by the standards of some critics that the narrator opens herself up to the possibility of insanity in order to take her revenge on those who restrain her. She latches on to the wallpaper and, driven wild by her anger towards her caregivers and her annoyance with the infernal pattern, drives herself mad. Rula Quawas suggests that "Gilman presents the narrator's insanity as a form of rebellion against the medical practices and the political policies that have kept women... under male control in the family and the state" (41). In fact, Gilman is not alone in her ideas regarding the counter-effectiveness of the rest cure. Like Gilman, "Women's Rights



advocates believed that neurosis—a diagnosis for many Victorian women—was a result of women’s repressed anger and enforced passivity and inactivity,” meaning that, as women were made to rest more often and strictly, their frustrations grew and began to manifest into psychological disorders such as neurosis (41). Therefore, the wallpaper acts as a catalyst for the narrator’s rage and as the only plausible target of her resentment.

In a less aggressive reading of the same concept, the narrator goes mad due to a deep-rooted, underlying conflict between her attachment to her roles as a wife, mother, and woman, and the unjust treatment she receives because of them. In trying to please society and her husband, the narrator has “consciously or unconsciously” assumed a “socially prescribed false [self],” which ultimately leads her yearn for “some lost, more authentic self” (Quawas 42). The narrator’s search for self ultimately brings her to the mysterious world behind the wallpaper. The appearance of the woman behind the wallpaper is curious to the narrator, and leads her to invest even more energy into her obsession with the paper. At this point, the narrator is desperate to find an identity that is familiar to her. Feeling as trapped as the woman behind the wallpaper, she begins to identify with her and pursue her. Soon, she begins to sense a whole community of women trapped behind the wallpaper, mentioning that “sometimes I think there are a great many women behind” it (Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper” 12). The narrator “ultimately discovers her adjusted selfhood in the yellow world, for it is these other women like her who provide a frame of reference for her existence: they bring ontological balance to this new territory by giving it context, meaning, and purpose” (Scott 202). Although the restrictions of her treatment and the expectations of society limit her ability to express herself, the protagonist creates a society of her own with the

woman or women behind the wallpaper. In this society, the narrator not only belongs, but also can be herself, something real society has never allowed her.

Another side of the text's criticism is inclined to support the idea that the narrator's relationship to the wallpaper is not emotional, but psychological. As noted by Lorelee MacPike, the wallpaper can be seen as a direct reflection of the narrator's mental state and stability. MacPike explains that the wallpaper "not only represents the narrator's state of mind, but becomes that state of mind" (288). As she becomes more and more restrained by her husband and his role as her physician and yearns more and more for the freedom to write and make her own decisions, the wallpaper becomes increasingly wild. For example, as the narrator becomes more distressed over her caregivers' reactions to her claims about the house and her personal improvement there, the wallpaper becomes more active. After explaining to her husband that she "really was not gaining" and that she believed she would make more progress somewhere else, her husband dismisses her claims, believing that "she will be sick as she pleases" (Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" 9). Her husband's rejection of her self-assessment changes nothing about the narrator's predicament with the wallpaper except, perhaps, to escalate it. That very night, the narrator lies awake trying to discern if the "front pattern and the back pattern really did move together or separately" (9). After this point in the story, the wallpaper's activity and the narrator's fascination with it begin to escalate more rapidly than ever. Many critics see this as an indication that the wallpaper's strange activity and the narrator's distress and mental instability are directly related. Michelle Massé is one of these critics, claiming that the wallpaper acts as "a grotesque exaggeration of and

rebellion against the monotonous schedule of her days” (704). The more frustrated and unstable the narrator becomes, the more she invests in the wallpaper.

One can witness the narrator’s deepening connection with the wallpaper by examining her physical contact with it. She initiates her first physical interactions with the paper “by only looking at the paper again and again to see if she can trace its pattern” (Massé 704). She is originally curious about the paper due to its indistinct patterns and offensive color. However, appraising and staring at the wallpaper soon becomes habitual. As she begins to feel more and more restrained, she becomes more physical with the wallpaper “[mapping] it with her hands” and “[copying] the movements of the women she sees by crawling around the room” (Massé 704). Because the protagonist cannot act out against her caregivers—her repressors—she internalizes her desire to rebel and projects it onto the wallpaper whose senseless, unrestrained patterns become a symbolic manifestation of the narrator’s emotions. The narrator regards the wallpaper “primarily by seeing her own situation—her entrapment, frustration, and anger—reflected back to her” (Hochman 137). The wallpaper’s irrational frenzy of swirls grows messier as the narrator’s mental health deteriorates. As MacPike points out, the narrator’s desires for freedom are finally culminated in the woman she sees trapped behind the wallpaper (288).

The woman in the wallpaper acts like a madwoman, “stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern” (Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper” 8). As the narrator becomes increasingly invested in the wallpaper, observing it becomes an almost sacred activity for her. The yellow wallpaper soon becomes her first priority, and she “becomes protective toward the paper and the fantasized double(s) who inhabit it, eventually going

to far as to threaten” her own family (Feldstein 309). As the narrator falls farther into madness, she begins to neglect her own need for release and begins to focus her attention on the “rescue of that woman” (MacPike 288). It is at this point that our protagonist completely loses her sense of self-preservation. By letting her own needs fall completely to the wayside, she abandons one of the most innate characteristics of functioning human beings. As stated in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s acclaimed study *The Madwoman in the Attic*, “it becomes obvious to both reader and narrator that the figure creeping through and behind the wallpaper is both the narrator and the narrator’s double” (91). The narrator has literally found herself in the wallpaper. Her desires to escape the house, her family, and her confinement fuel a “projection of desire...onto the woman trapped behind the bars” (MacPike 288). The wallpaper has arguably become the “only thing she can control” (288). In order to assuage her loneliness and frustration, “she creates the woman in the wallpaper as someone to interact with,” as someone she knows will understand her (288).

On a less personal level, critics such as Barbara A. Suess find that the protagonist’s impression of the wallpaper is such that it represents her views about society—confusing, senseless, and “grotesque” (93). As she strives to understand the paper, she finds herself becoming only more and more confused; she is an individual who cannot fit into the mold of society (94). The emotional stress of this scenario may be the cause of the narrator’s susceptibility to the wallpaper’s pull. Even Jennie, who appears to be mentally healthy, is seen considering the wallpaper, indicating that she too is aware of the parallels the narrator sees between the pattern and Victorian society. Massé suggests that, in the end, perhaps “the horror from which the heroine cannot escape is the

limitation of her identity to a mirror for the self-representations of father and husband” (682). The narrator struggles with this idea, the conflict of identity weakening and weakened by her mental state. Similarly, the woman behind the wallpaper is trapped behind the confusing, seemingly senseless structure of the wallpaper. According to this logic, then, the woman behind the wallpaper is actually a subconscious manifestation of the protagonist (Suess 94).

The interpretation of the story that supports the insanity claim, however, has many different aspects and interpretations itself. For example, other critics believe that, instead of identifying with the wallpaper, the narrator uses it as a form of escapism. The protagonist’s obsession with the wallpaper develops because it offers her the opportunity to “[enter] an action-filled world that she creates by interference from a printed design” (Hochman 130). The narrator is forced to give up any form of expression or mental stimulation in order to comply with her treatment plan. However, without her usual pen and paper available, the narrator is forced to find an alternate outlet for her active mind. By utilizing the wallpaper, the narrator is able to give her mind something to do in the wake of the restrictive rest cure, and her “depression and despair are temporarily dispelled” (130). Ironically, John’s removal of the narrator’s creative outlets for what he believes is his wife’s own good is the very act that “brings about the...circumstance he wants to prevent” (Shumaker 590). Elaine R. Hedges explores the narrator’s escapism further by pointing out the Freudian nature of escapist actions, claiming that the narrator withdraws and becomes “hopelessly encrypted in fantasy” (225). It is in this realm that the wallpaper is given a life of its own and the narrator resigns herself to a life of passive existence (225).

While the general consensus among critics regarding “The Yellow Wallpaper” is that the protagonist goes indisputably mad, some modern critics interpret the tale to be supernatural in nature. Since its publication, “The Yellow Wallpaper” has been subject to controversy regarding nearly every aspect of the work, from how to spell “wallpaper”—is it wallpaper or wall-paper?—to confusion regarding Gilman’s various surnames (Feldstein 307). Many critics “firmly established ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ in the mad-narrator genre, yet ironically they have never satisfactorily explained the narrator’s sudden and profound insanity” (Wegley 16). Many critics simply take the narrator’s insanity as a given piece of plot information, and make no attempt to prove or disprove this fact. In actuality, however, “The Yellow Wallpaper” was originally accepted as a ghost story that simply contained a deeper meaning below the surface. Gilman’s readers initially took the text to be a “Poe-esque tale of chilling horror,” some completely overlooking the possibility of a psychological reading and Gilman’s underlying statements about the rest cure (Owens 67). It is no surprise, then, that despite Gilman’s direct declaration of the protagonist’s madness, controversy has arisen regarding the reality of supernatural elements in the text. Wegley quotes Owens, claiming that “a second story exists beside the story of repression and madness—a supernatural tale drawn from the best nineteenth-century gothic conventions” (17). While such an interpretation of the text may seem useless to those regarding the work with Gilman’s personal experience and stated motivation in mind, it is not impossible to see the ways in which the text may be interpreted as a ghost tale, rather than as an exposé and criticism of psychological treatments.

While viewing the text in a supernatural light, it is important to remember that “in order to pursue a ‘literal’ reading of Gilman’s plot, one must maintain confidence in the narrator’s mental lucidity. Her husband, a doctor, does not believe that she is sick, though he suggests that she suffers from a ‘temporary nervous depression’” (Wegley 19). Because the protagonist’s husband believes she is of sound mind, though she requires rest to recover from the emotional stress and aftereffects of childbirth, it is possible that the narrator may be, in fact, sane. The reader must trust in the narrator’s sanity just as her husband does in order to achieve the full effect of Gilman’s Gothic elements. Richard Feldstein explains that readers must simply “suspend [their] judgment when interpreting an event as representative of either the supernatural (the women in the wall-paper are ghosts) or uncanny (the protagonist projects self-aspects to form her double[s])” (317). By doing so, the reader is more capable of viewing the story in a supernatural light and will be able to understand the text on a supernatural level as well as a psychological one.

Through the lens of supernatural interpretation, Gilman constructs the narrator’s haunting from the first page of the story. The narrator’s hope that the home will be haunted invites the idea of supernatural forces and sets the stage for the events that are to transpire. As the story develops, the narrator soon learns that “it is one thing to wish for a ghost” and “quite another to be haunted by one” (Owens 75). Although the narrator’s interest in experiencing a real haunting is a child-like whim, the actual haunting she experiences is far more than she has imagined. Feldman recognizes that because the “protagonist acknowledges...the possibility of a supernatural interpretation” readers are given further evidence that they must open up their minds to a more paranormal interpretation of the text (317). The narrator also poses two questions “concerning the

house which commonly appear in ghost stories: ‘Else why should it be let so cheaply? And why have stood so long untenanted’” (Owens 68). Despite the eerie feelings she gets from the house, the narrator’s husband consistently discredits them, telling her that she is only being imaginative. Gilman uses these exchanges between the narrator and her husband to submit to the reader “a mixture of impressions and suggestions,” creating a “conventionally Gothic setting” (Owens 69). Owens claims that these questions “affirm the narrator’s rationality,” as her ability to question her environment proves that she has the foresight to consider these questions in light of their current situation. In the traditional interpretation of the text as a narrative of madness, the eerie feeling the narrator gets from the house may be interpreted as her mind beginning to crack. However, a supernatural assessment of the situation provides a much simpler explanation: the narrator is sensing a ghost or presence in the house. From her first look at the house, the protagonist feels a certain kind of eeriness about the house, and the paranormal phenomena begin as she begins to settle in.

She is initially annoyed by the wallpaper; there is simply something about it that bothers her. Though she may merely find the wallpaper itself in bad taste, the associations the narrator makes with the paper suggest a more sinister situation. It may very well be the supernatural phenomena surrounding the paper that attracts and holds her attention, as she notices that the color feels “unclean” and “repellant” (Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper” 3). Her fascination with the wallpaper despite its abhorrence begins as a curious obsession. The strange patterns and distasteful color of the wallpaper bothers her to no end and brings her to spend hours trying to make sense of it. The more time and energy she invests in the wallpaper, the more it begins to come alive.



The wallpaper's actions are subtle at first. Initially, the narrator believes that she sees "people walking in [those] numerous paths and arbors" surrounding the house, though her husband assures her that no one is there and advises her not to give way to such fancies (4). He tells her that her "imaginative power" and "habit of story-making" are causing her to run wild with fancies about the wallpaper and encourages her to focus on something else (4). The wallpaper shall not be subdued, however. Once the narrator attempts to focus her mind on something else, the wallpaper begins to contact her more directly. The fiendish paper begins to look back at her. Despite attempting to ignore the wallpaper, the narrator describes that she gets the feeling that the wallpaper is sentient, that it "looks to [her] as if it knew what a vicious influence it had" (5). Once this connection to the narrator has been made, it slowly begins to reveal itself to her. She becomes privy to the "broken neck" and "bulbous eyes" of the wallpaper as it gazes at her. The protagonist admits that the detail of the face she sees in the wallpaper is extremely unusual, even for someone with an imagination as active as hers. She claims that she "never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before" (5). Mark Wegley claims that Gilman's "grotesque descriptions" of the wallpaper are meant to directly invoke the sense of the Gothic, the sense that what the narrator is seeing is not simply a hallucination, but completely real (20). The wallpaper's twisted features become clearer and clearer until the wallpaper ultimately chooses a form appropriate for presenting itself to the narrator.

The images finally take shape as the image of a woman trapped behind the pattern in the wallpaper. The appearance of this woman disturbs the narrator so much that she exclaims that she "[does] not like it" and that she wishes "John would take [her] away"

(8). It is easy to see here that the narrator is not enamored by the wallpaper, as some interpretations of her madness would promote. Instead, the narrator is terrified by the images she sees in the wallpaper's strange yellow pattern. Owens argues that the narrator's fear of the wallpaper is a sign of her sanity, saying "the narrator's perceptions of the strangeness of the place, combined with her perception of nocturnal movements, suggest that what she fears is a ghost, and like sensitive characters in many ghost stories, she asks to be taken away from the haunted house" (75). The narrator's reaction to the realization that she is staying in a haunted house is completely rational. She wishes be removed, to flee the evil she senses manifesting in the wallpaper. In fact, the narrator's obvious aversion to the wallpaper demonstrates that what she sees is not something she has created herself, but something that she does not understand, something that drives her away.

Though the wallpaper is essentially successful in haunting the young woman, it is far from finished with its haunting. The wallpaper's final step is to cross from its world into the world of the narrator. She begins to see the woman in the wallpaper become more active, appearing to "shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out" (Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" 8). The narrator soon begins to see that the woman is shaking what appear to be bars in the wallpaper—she is trapped there, and she is trying to get out. From the beginning, the narrator has been bewitched by the puzzling wallpaper. It has vexed, annoyed, and pestered her until she has completely invested herself in it. With this bridge established, the wallpaper makes its final move and possesses her. Owens notes that, though the narrator tries to avoid any kind of "identification with the haunting presence" or with "the woman or women trapped in the wallpaper," her close

involvement to it and deteriorating spiritual strength have made her susceptible to possession (76). The line between the protagonist and the woman of the wallpaper becomes blurred. She begins to speak as if she herself is trapped behind the wallpaper, saying “I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did?” and “I suppose I shall have to get back behind the patterns when it comes night” (Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper” 14). She locks herself in and finds a groove in the wallpaper on which to rest her shoulder as she creeps around the room. The protagonist’s husband beats on the door, insisting that he be let in. After finally retrieving the key to the room, he enters to find his wife walking circles around the room. His demand for an answer is met by the eerie reply “I’ve got out at last...and I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!” (15). The narrator’s mind and body have been taken over by the force residing in the wallpaper, and with no pattern left to seal it back on the wall, the protagonist may be enslaved by the wallpaper forever.

The interpretation of “The Yellow Wallpaper” as a ghost story rather than social commentary may be less widely recognized, but it continues to remain important to the overall value of the work nonetheless. Wegley argues that “Gilman consciously intended to leave open a supernatural interpretation” of “The Yellow Wallpaper” (20), purposefully incorporating supernatural elements of the Gothic in order to convey the horror one experiences while losing one’s mental faculties, while simultaneously creating a second layer of the text for open interpretation and criticism. Mark Wegley argues that “Gilman draws freely on gothic literary conventions” in order to make the narrator’s possession by the woman trapped behind the wallpaper “a plausible outcome” (16). By orienting the story so that, with the proper mindset, one can see how the tale may be a

supernatural thriller as opposed to a psychological critique, Gilman is able to apply her work to a wider audience, ranging from those seeking a good scare to those pursuing a first-hand account of Dr. S. Weir Mitchell's famed rest cure.

The supernatural interpretation of the text, however, seems to have a rather substantial following, despite the popularity of the madness interpretation. Akşehir argues that, although "the story was considered...a good example of grotesque Gothic fiction when it was first published...it would be a merciless oversimplification to reduce the story merely to a good example of grotesque Gothic fiction" (2). The short story was clearly meant to be a statement regarding a practice that Gilman felt was not only outdated, but was negatively affecting Victorian women every day, as opposed to a mere ghost story. Wegley claims that the most important thing to remember upon interpreting "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a supernatural tale is this: "'The Yellow Wallpaper' should not be read as a supernatural/gothic text instead of a narrative of madness. A true reading includes both ideas. An 'insanity' reading relies on the supernatural subtext." As he further explains, "critics promoting the narrator's insanity without acknowledging the gothic foundation of the story reduce the aesthetic appreciation and academic use of the story" (21).

In fact, according to E. Suzanne Owens, early readers of "The Yellow Wallpaper" appeared to recognize the multilevel qualities of the text and treated it as "a narrative combining the supernatural with aberrant psychology" (65). Because Victorians developed interests in the supernatural and the psychological at roughly the same time, their acceptance of the text as both a supernatural ghost story and a tale of impending madness is quite rational. Just as Henry James does in *The Turn of the Screw*, Charlotte

Perkins Gilman crafts a story that may be interpreted as a tale of the paranormal, of ghosts and spirits, and as a tale of madness, of a woman pushed past her limits into insanity. However, modern critics seem to advocate for one interpretation over the other, refusing to allow for both interpretations of the text to be simultaneously true. As understood by the text's Victorian readers, although the protagonist is thought to be insane according to the common interpretation, it is still possible to review the text in a supernatural light. This interpretation, a tale of haunting and possession, demonstrates Gilman's use of the supernatural as a representation of the protagonist's madness. As stated by Helen Horowitz, "Gilman worked within the horror genre...and followed its ghostly template, but by domesticating her tale and grounding it in realistic details, she enhanced its uncanny effect and opened up a world of suggestion and potential interpretation" (176). Because Gilman was familiar with horror writing, however, she was able to utilize this knowledge to tell more than a mere horror story.

Perhaps the most important aspects of "The Yellow Wallpaper" are Gilman's intention when writing the piece and her dedication to the women to whom she was giving a voice. Massé finds that one of the true focal points of Gilman's short story is "the impasse of Gilman's narrator between individual insight and unchanging social codes" (707). Rula Quawas offers perhaps one of the best summations of Gilman's text and its effects on the social and medical worlds of women at the time. Quawas states that:

What makes Gilman's story radical is that it articulates the values of her culture and society and, in that very assertion, calls them into question.

She opens up the issue or ideology of the rest cure as a topic of discourse

and demonstrates how her narrator has internalized this ideology and must stand in opposition to this treatment in order to escape its tyranny. (50)

This array of possibilities and interpretations generates a diversity of critical thought. By drawing the reader's attention to the unnatural aspects of the narrator's life at her rented home, that which is unnatural in the mind of the narrator is further illuminated. Greg Johnson makes the observation that "The Yellow Wallpaper" is widely "under-read" by modern readers and that the work continues to "[haunt] the margins of the American literary canon" (Johnson 530). However, despite the work's underrated acclaim, there is no question that "Gilman and the full scope of her achievement" will receive "their due recognition" (530).

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a text that is more than a mere ghost story or insanity narrative. Gilman's work reflects an issue close to the author's heart, one which she herself experienced and wished to prevent in the lives of other women. As noted by Johnson, upon reading "The Yellow Wallpaper," the reader can "only guess at the furious effort, and the constant bargaining with her own demons, by which that achievement came into being" (530). Because of Gilman's deep connection with the topic of the text, she is able to utilize her strengths and areas of expertise to craft a work that would not only alarm her readers, but also inspire them to reconsider certain institutions and practices of the time. Gilman used her familiarity with the rest cure to create the foundations for "The Yellow Wallpaper"'s statements about Victorian society. Combined with the eerie writing techniques she learned from her experience as a horror writer, she was able to craft a tale that was both creepy in its imagery and startling in its meaning. Whether by ghosts or insanity, Gilman is able to

address conventions of nineteenth-century society directly and honestly through her work.

### **Jumping to Conclusions: Why Does All This Matter?**

The Victorian era saw not only the emergence of new philosophies, theories, and schools of thought, but also distinct changes in society as a result of those ideologies. These ideas quickly became a part of Victorian popular culture and began to cause a distinct shift in the nature of Victorian parlor talk. More importantly, these ideas eventually influenced the arts and literature of that time, leading artists and writers to question, challenge, or support the era's evolving ideologies. While some ideas became more prominent than others, two concepts that proved to be highly important to the development of Victorian popular culture were the practice of Spiritualism and the redefinition of psychology. As previously mentioned, Spiritualism was generally defined as the belief, or even religious perspective, that the spirits of the dead continued to exist among the living. Spiritualists boasted that they could contact the souls of the dead and often claimed to be able to communicate with them, either on behalf of someone else or out of their own curiosity. Also mentioned earlier, Sigmund Freud's revolutionary ideas brought the field of psychoanalysis into the scope of popular culture as well. Prior to the ideas of Freud, psychology was an undeveloped field; believing that individuals could be infantilized and rewired, psychologists often referred patients to 'asylums' where the infantilization process could begin (Fee 640). Freud, however, theorized that several levels of the conscious and subconscious created the individual, and that patients should be encouraged to relive and confront their issues, rather than being rewired around them. Psychology and supernatural ideas were often presented in relation to one another, especially following Freud's essay "The Uncanny." This relationship ultimately yielded the genre of art and literature we know as the Gothic.



Works such as Sigmund Freud's "The Uncanny" imply that the supernatural and madness are interchangeable, meaning that uncanny, supernatural phenomena and mental processes can be seen as directly related, even as the same thing. The essay suggests that experiences of supernatural phenomenon are actually the result of an underlying psychological problem, whether that problem takes the form of repression, projection, or something similar. It implies that all supernatural occurrences stem from the mind, as opposed to a preexisting otherworldly realm from which paranormal figures enter reality. Although straying somewhat from the scope of Freud's thesis, it is also possible that the essay could spark the argument that madness stems from the mind's inability to handle supernatural incidents. By taking the position that the supernatural is real, we open up the possibility that the supernatural is not the result of madness, but that madness is a result of the supernatural. Seeing things others do not could put untold stress on the mind as it attempts to reconcile the unknown, eventually causing a mental breakdown. While not the only way to understand madness and the supernatural, theories such as Freud's may ultimately lead to the idea that the supernatural and madness are not mutually exclusive. The relationship between madness and the supernatural was one of the main factors that lead to the creation of Gothic works, which often combined the supernatural with madness or presented them in extremely close proximity. This phenomenon can be seen in *The Turn of the Screw* and "The Yellow Wallpaper," two works written within ten years of each other by American authors of the Victorian era.

It is important to understand that many of the circumstances surrounding the two authors we have focused on are the same. Both wrote at about the same time in the Victorian period, meaning that the popular topics and social protocols of the time would

have been the same for both authors, providing them with a similar vein of influence. Furthermore, both authors were American, meaning they were both a part of the same national community. Although the broader aspects of Victorian culture were largely similar in both America and England, what each community found important could vary largely from country to country. By assessing texts written by two authors from the same time and place, we can see how Victorian culture influenced them: both texts reflect themes that were common to the time in question; however, the way each author handles these themes is what makes the texts important. Henry James utilizes the supernatural in order to tell a horrific ghost story, one made even more horrific by the possibility that the protagonist is actually insane, meaning the events of the story, including Miles's death, are a direct result of her own actions. Meanwhile, Gilman utilizes the supernatural in order to portray the horror of madness. By using the creepy imagery commonly associated with the supernatural to exemplify the terrors of insanity, Gilman crafts a cautionary tale, one she hoped would save other women from suffering such a fate.

It is true that the culture in which we live acts as a great influence on our interests, opinions, and identities. However, the ways we use those influences is entirely up to us. Though the majority of Gothic literature was created during the Victorian era, the intensity of various themes and what they are trying to say varies distinctly from piece to piece. One thing is for certain, however: the interests of Victorian culture at the time, the populace's distinct interests in Spiritualism and the supernatural and in psychology and the logistics of insanity ultimately determined the distinct and fascinating genre of the Gothic. The importance Victorian culture placed on the supernatural through its interests in Spiritualist practices, such as séances, and the scientific community's frustration with

many of the movement's claims made it important to the identity of Victorian culture, made it significant to understanding the Victorian mindset. Likewise, the criticisms of mental health care by psychological theorists made concerns of the mind an equally important topic for Victorians, and eventually led to the works of psychologists such as Sigmund Freud, who is considered the father of modern psychoanalysis. Both James and Gilman found themselves immersed in a society fascinated by Spiritualism, the supernatural, psychology, and madness. The similarities of their works to social interests, and to each other, leads to the conclusion that the authors' thematic interests were undoubtedly a product of their environment. Considering the effect of culture on the works of artists and writers can offer insights into not only the art created during that time, but also how that culture influences the generations to come.

Even today, elements of the Gothic continue to find their way into art and literature. *The Woman in Black* is a horror novel written in 1983 by Susan Hill. The novel, though written almost one hundred years after James's *The Turn of the Screw*, reflects many similar themes as those in James's novella. The novel takes place in an old manor that is haunted by the ghost of a woman seeking revenge for the death of her child. *The Woman in Black*'s protagonist, Arthur Kipps, is plagued by the woman as he attempts to settle the estate's legal matters. Like James's governess, Kipps is alarmed by the supernatural phenomena going on at Eel Marsh, but has trouble gaining any information from others and struggles to make sense of the haunting. The text is quite Gothic in its domestic country house setting, and appears to take place during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, near the end of the Victorian period. The popularity of a work addressing the supernatural remains constant, as the text has spurred

two radio dramas, a play, and two film adaptations, one of which was a major motion picture released in 2012. Interest in the domestic supernatural is not the only element of the Gothic genre that has continued to inspire writers as artists, however. *Black Swan*, a film released in 2010, based on a screenplay written by Mark Heyman and Andres Heinz, tells the story of Nina Sayers, a ballerina whose is plagued by terrifying visions as she attempts to perfect the role of Swan Lake's black swan for a major production. As the story progresses, it becomes obvious that the pressure of the role is slowly driving her insane, causing her to think that she is being stalked by a fearful presence. Much like "The Yellow Wallpaper," the story utilizes images of the supernatural in order to depict the protagonist's steady fall into madness. The appearance of Gothic themes in modern art and literature is evidence of the enduring influence of Victorianism and the Gothic on culture.

A better understanding of the emergence of themes such as the supernatural and madness into popular culture can provide a better understanding of the works being produced with those themes in mind, as well as the ways modern culture can be influenced by the interests of its past. By acknowledging the importance of social influence on arts and literature, we open ourselves up to the possibility of cultural research as literary research. While the supernatural and madness are common to Gothic literature, there is no reason why the same kind of cultural study could not be applied to the study of the pastoral or morality play. An investigation into not just the influence of culture, but the factors that influenced culture, is extremely relevant to understanding what a piece of art or literature has to say about a culture as well as what it says about the development of the culture itself. By utilizing this way of thinking when examining

exemplary texts such as *The Turn of the Screw* or “The Yellow Wallpaper,” we can understand not only why the Gothic exists, but how the Gothic exists, not only how a culture has developed, but why a culture has developed.

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